Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Commentary

The Role of Student Advisory Boards in Assessment

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Abstract

Objective – The objective for this commentary article is to assess and communicate the development, logistics, and overall value of student advisory boards for the libraries at three large research institutions.

Methods – The methods for developing and operating an advisory board vary between schools; however they share common approaches that could be viewed as "best practices" for sustainable and productive student advisory boards.

Results – Our commentary aims to inspire libraries to invest in this value-added approach as part of a robust portfolio of assessment tools. The various practices outlined in the commentary could be helpful to librarians who seek to begin or further develop a student advisory board.

Conclusion – The unique relationship fostered by the advisory board enables libraries to use direct student feedback to confirm what is learned from surveys, focus groups, and observations. A strategic relationship with a student board can enable librarians to refine methods of obtaining information, or it can cause us to view information we have collected in a different way.

Introduction

A student advisory board can be a unique addition to an academic library's assessment program. Boards give libraries valuable feedback. This paper addresses benefits of library student advisory boards, as well as procedures for maintaining successful boards to enhance or enrich information for assessment.

Setting

Practices for board management at Georgia Institute of Technology, University of Central Florida (UCF), and the University of Louisville have developed active, engaged advisory board members. Members have contributed to outcomes such as service improvements, successful space redesign, and improved alignment between library strategic objectives and user needs. Best practices identified by these institutions are applicable to many other contexts.

All three institutions have received valuable assessment information from student advisory boards. The input has triggered additional evaluation and assessment of programs resulting in improvements for services or resources in areas that needed addressing and focusing on campus life trends that affect library use. Evidence demonstrates that the return on investment in student advisory boards has been a net positive for each institution.

Problem

Although research libraries have a relatively robust tradition of assessing and responding to student needs via survey tools such as LibQUAL, concerted efforts to develop a long-standing, strategic relationship with students is a newer phenomenon (Thompson, Cook & Heath, 2000). A student advisory board can help fill this void. Our experience suggests that student advisory boards give academic libraries feedback and information on user perceptions and experiences, strategic guidance, and suggestions/ideas for new or improved services, facilities, and resources. Each of these three institutions has experienced the benefits of receiving information from a group of committed student board members.

The idea of advisory boards originated with corporations and non-profit organizations. Consumer panels or boards can react to products and services, as well as to the overall experience of shopping with or dealing with the organization. Non-profits can get advice on the community environment, and get help with advocacy from board members. (Carter, Geehan, Ross, 2005)

There are other groups that can give feedback to the library but are outside this paper's scope. Many academic libraries have a group appointed by the provost or Faculty Senate to provide oversight on strategic directions and to be part of institutional governance. Fundraising and friends' groups can help the library tell its story to influential people. While the library can

receive feedback from these groups, none of them is designed to give the kind of direct reports that users of the facilities, resources and services can.

Evidence

The decision to form an advisory board can occur due to a variety of reasons. At Georgia Tech, an ad hoc group of honors students reached out with informal feedback to ensure that the students voice helped inform a library renovation project. The input that these students provided was valuable enough to encourage library administration to continue the board more formally. The Dean at Louisville had formerly worked with the student board while at Georgia Tech. Based on the positive results there, he sought to recreate that type of experience after moving to Louisville.

At UCF, the board was established with the broader goal of ensuring that library administrators had a direct line to student opinion and feedback when it was needed to evaluate services, resources and facilities. Surveys, including LibQUAL+, interviews, newsletters, blogs, suggestion boxes, mystery shoppers, and more have all generated feedback and facilitated communication with students. The board serves as a safety net to help answer the questions, "Is the library's story reaching students? Does the library know what students really think?" The development of this trusted channel for open communication has paid off in helping to keep the library's planned building improvements on the university's list of priorities despite funding challenges. The board's role has been essential in smaller matters, such as board members reaching out to the student press to publicize new services, and confirming that students read and value the information disseminated in the "bathroom newsletter".

Implementation

Library decisions on the structure and operation of the board can determine the types of feedback that the board delivers. The purpose of its board, campus culture, tradition, and practices can dictate the formality of advisory board establishment, member recruitment, and composition. While different at each institution, these are vital pieces of the long-term success of these boards. Boards present library leadership with the opportunity for direct interaction with an important group of stakeholders, but student members should not feel outnumbered by administrators at meetings. Frequency of meetings and the meeting agenda are also crucial in sustaining member enthusiasm and in generating informative discussion.

One characteristic that makes student advisory boards unique is synergy. When the library surveys or interviews students, it receives individual feedback that is not influenced by the presence of others. Even focus groups are individuals brought together on that occasion for that specific purpose. In contrast, student advisory board members become acquainted with each other over a period of time and develop an "esprit de corps." While they are individuals, they have common experiences as students of the same institution and users of the same library. In the best of circumstances, they can become a team that supports the library. Demonstrating to the student board that they are important can help create the unique synergy that, combined with their being more comfortable with library administrators, allows for a more honest, open and caring conversation about the library.

To create an environment for this kind of feedback, examine the campus culture and determine how you will appoint members. Receiving an appointment, and being able to put that on a resume, is important to students. Student Government and student organizations can help recruit or be solicited for top students as board members. Faculty, administrators, and

librarians can suggest student members. At Georgia Tech, particular attention is paid to the composition of the board because 70% of the student body are engineering majors. Additionally, a unique relationship between the library and the Institute's top scholarship program ensures that high achieving, motivated students are appointed to the board. Careful and conscientious recruitment is a key factor in ensuring a sustainable and active board. At UCF, students who contact the library with constructive criticism are recruited, often becoming the most enthusiastic board members.

Logistical considerations for sustainable student boards are crucial. There should be some regularity regarding meeting frequency. Among the institutions discussed here, three meetings per semester is common. It is also vital to distribute minutes and decisions from the previous meetings with the agenda for the next meeting. Many board meetings occur during a lunch or dinner hour and a best practice is to provide a meal. Finally, if available, meetings should be held in special or exclusive spaces such as an administrative boardroom.

Results

Examples of the role of board-gathered information and activities in enhancing the assessment process are included below. At our institutions, a key outcome for successful assessment initiatives has been that it closes the loop by soliciting information from users, analyzing it, acting upon it, and communicating the change back to users. The impact is felt by students who recognize that the library values their input. Active student advisory boards produce comments and feedback, and with library decision-makers present, changes are made and reported back quickly. For example, at UCF, a board member complained about viewing the local news station in the coffee area, claiming it was nothing better than a crime blotter---a litany of robberies, car-jackings, and the like. The student initially suggested the BBC, but the Board discussion led to displaying a

national news station. Favorable student commentary followed the change: the loop was closed. It demonstrated to the Board that their opinions are important even on seemingly small matters.

At the University of Louisville, the Board has proven very useful in physical improvement projects and web usability studies. Members serve as a sounding board for feedback on facilities changes. They have also been part of interactive design charrettes for planning construction.

At Georgia Tech, student Board members have contributed in myriad ways from service design improvements, to being at the table with designers and architects putting comprehensive renovation plans together.

Library administration can provide an overview on facilities and services, and student advocates can take it upon themselves to present that information to campus administrators. At Georgia Tech, student Board members wrote a letter asking the Institute's administration to address the condition of the library building. However, if advocacy is not handled correctly it can become an ethical issue. For example, the library should not expressly ask board members to write a letter on its behalf. Instead, advocacy should arise naturally as students become better informed about issues facing the library.

At UCF, Advisory Board members have tested survey questions and related assessment tools. Reviewing survey results with students can generate further discussion and information-gathering, and can help translate survey commentary with more context. Board members can make valuable suggestions to overcome the challenges of publicizing results and increasing participation in assessment efforts. They have also provided invaluable information for planning building projects.
Perhaps the most gratifying experience that each institution has had with its board is witnessing the conversion of board members to active

advocates for the library. Advocates help close the assessment loop by supporting the programs and enhancements suggested by assessment results, through invaluable word-of-mouth publicity and through support of funding initiatives that enable these improvements.

Boards are not a shortcut to obtaining qualitative assessment information. If done well, everything takes time: recruiting the right students, preparing agendas, distributing minutes. Student advisory boards are only one tool in an assessment portfolio.

Conclusion

Our students can inspire us. The unique relationship fostered by the advisory board environment enables libraries to use direct student feedback to confirm what we have learned from surveys, focus groups, and observations. A strategic relationship with a student board can enable us to refine our methods of obtaining information, or it can cause us to view information we have collected in a different way.

Although managing a library student advisory board is time-consuming, it can be part of an effective and sustainable assessment plan. More importantly, the outcomes of this investment in leveraging student wisdom can pay dividends in a multitude of ways.

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